

Releasing the Prisoners of Hope: Dante's *Purgatorio* Breaks the Chains of the Born Frees

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Introduction: The River of Blood

There is a field in Italy, hard by a stream where a South African soldier on the run from the Nazis once stood up to his armpits in water, hidden in the reeds. Years later his son visited the peasant family that sheltered his father at great risk to their lives. Crossing the newly-ploughed field, he imagined the faces of dead soldiers turned up in the clods,¹ and when he came to the stream itself, he recognized in it, bubbling up as if with many more dead faces, the river Phlegethon, the boiling river of blood:

Ma ficca li occhi a valle, ché s'approccia
La riviera del sangue in la qual bolle
Qual che per violenza in altrui nocchia (*Inf.* 12.46–8).²

The soldier was 'Tufty' Mann, soon to win fame as an international cricketer. The son was poet Chris 'Zithulele' Mann, tireless campaigner for the value of literature, who died earlier this year, 700 years after the Florentine poet he admired so much.

¹ "I look up from my feet. / The clods are thick in the fields / that stretch across the plains / beyond the crinkle of the Alps, / to Auschwitz, the Somme," from *A Field in Italy* (Mann 2010, 72). The identification of the stream with Phlegethon is from a personal conversation.

² Cf. Butcher 2007, referring to the Congo. See discussion of *Heart of Darkness* below.

This poignant story speaks of the reach of Dante's great poem, its capacity to take hold of the African poetic imagination—for Chris Mann became more and more preoccupied with the importance of the shades for our personal and national health. It is not just the privileged white South African of an earlier generation, Oxford-educated and heir to a long tradition of immersion in world poetry, who feels a special affinity with *La Commedia*. In this volume we encounter poems, short stories, sketches and essays by young South Africans of every kind, many of them the first to attend university, few with previous exposure to Italian, inspired by another South African with a personal connection to the war in Italy. Sonia Fanucchi's grandfather was one of the last surviving Italian prisoners of war here. On Armistice Day every year he would don his uniform and drive to Zonderwater to pay tribute to his comrades at the *Tre archi* cemetery, 'Morti in prigionia / Vinti nella carne / Invitti nello spirito', while consigning Il Duce to a condign place in hell.

It was as a graduate teaching assistant in the English department at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, that Sonia Fanucchi first introduced a second-year undergraduate elective to Dante's *Inferno*, under the rubric 'Pity and Piety'. The elective belonged to the medieval component in the department's contrapuntal curriculum, designed to promote a dialogue between older, canonical literary texts and contemporary texts that resonate with them. In this case, Dante was not formally paired with any recent texts (although there were references to modern movies like *Seven*), but the students were invited to question their own responses to the sinners in hell, testing their present-day values against those of Dante and Virgil. They also became aware of the extraordinary afterlife of Dante in English, with the proliferation of translations, biographies and studies. As Sonia progressed to her doctorate and then to a lectureship in the department, she linked up with the Italian studies department and the Dantessa group took shape: colleagues and students meeting informally to pursue their interest in Dante and explore their responses in writing.

I began reading the Dantessa writings at random, but a pattern soon began to emerge. It begins with an exploration and affirmation of black womanhood in response to Beatrice and Francesca da Rimini—probably the two best-known female figures in the poem, far removed from each other in its formal scheme of judgement, but not to be separated. The Francesca in Beatrice can exalt the woman in Africa. How is this possible? We will turn to our writers to see. Let us simply note, right at the start, that thinking about Dante can be a means of recovery for a bruised generation. Through most of the Dantessa writings runs a thread of subdued optimism. They are in agreement that our country has a hellish past and even a residual hellishness in our present, but either we come to Dante in expectation that he might show us a way out of hell, or the reading of Dante arouses new expectations in us. Even while we stare aghast at the legacy of the settler politicians, the hell to which they rightly belong is lit up by Dante's vision. There are mad flights into *Inferno*, and another flight that could be in *Limbo*. There is a sea voyage down the coast of Africa, a storm and daybreak. There is a tree in hell and a forest in purgatory. There is a re-calibration of time.

In all these narratives and responses I sense a recognition of the purgatorial quality of our current situation, and a readiness to rise to that challenge. And I end with some reflections of my own, about the kind of critical practice appropriate to a scholar in purgatory, reminding myself of the river of blood I failed to recognize when I was the same age as our students. It takes a long, arduous journey, though, to reach the vantage point where we can think more kindly of our role as readers in South Africa and the world.

Dante's Women and the Regeneration of Black Womanhood

So much has been written about Beatrice over the centuries, by Charles Williams (1943) notably, that you wonder what there is left to say. Critics are always capable of finding a new angle, some fashionable or innovative approach to generate an article or a book, but there is something artificial about this make-work, and most of their ingenious efforts will soon be forgotten. Here a young woman, Lesego Maponyane, simply takes a long hard look at Beatrice and finds something compelling in what she sees, wondering what Beatrice might mean for her image of black womanhood. For Lesego, Beatrice is a paradoxical combination of ingenuity and ingenuousness. On the one hand, she is a passive frame for Dante's ideal of the feminine, enabling him to justify his love as reasonable. He depicts her as perfect, complete, a trinity of trinities. But if we bring such an ingénue into relation to the historical Beatrice, or to any real, actual woman who has lived on earth, rather than a miracle descended from heaven, something must give. From the moment of every woman's birth, fissures will appear in her moral constitution. All experience damages the complete whole. Where does this leave ingenuousness? It flees the moment the soul claps its hands and is free to be itself. So we are left with an empty but beautiful image of ingenuous perfection, immensely powerful as a driving force in Dante's life and imagination, but also capable, through his mediation, of affecting black women in South Africa today. That is her ingenuity. Black women, too, can embody this curious combination of vulnerability and strength. Lesego feels that the figure of Beatrice can encourage women to transcend the fracturing and alienation and loss of dignity experienced by so many, through a combination of who they can be imagined, through Dante's lens, to be—complete, immaculate, intact—with their physical power and presence:

She gives women, black women in particular, the space to be more than strong or vulnerable [...] not perfect as in flawless, but perfect as in comprehensive—one can live every and any femininity, all of them at once or none at all (sup., p. 76-7).

The transcendent force of Beatrice rises ever stronger in the *Commedia*, until, in the *Paradiso*, she leaves behind the trivialised and predictable figure of adolescent girlhood and becomes almost irresistible, not as an object of sexual desire but as an icon of knowledge, an allegory of wisdom closely associated with the beatific vision. As we progress through the *Commedia*, the whole of human history is caught up in a current ultimately pouring into God himself. So Beatrice

participates in a loving energy second to none, that sweeps up all our earthly experiences. Now if a black woman can identify with this, via the combination of vulnerability and strength that bypasses the difficulties and limitations and suffering of her present life, then she is capable of a self-image and an aspiration that renders nugatory all conventional anxieties about agency.

Lesego's complex vision may seem far removed from Luyanda Kaitoo's praise poem celebrating the perfection of the African woman's queenly body, in more explicitly and assertively sexual terms:

Miraculous!

Fissure upon curve—bend upon crevice

Pulchritude adorning the finest detail of her every flaw (sup., pp. 69-70).

It is because Beatrice has a body that her ingenuousness and her ingenuity can meet; otherwise the figure of Beatrice would simply break up into its two parts, with nothing to hold them together. The body is the *sine qua non*, however Dante responds to it. He may sublimate or suppress the sexual in favour of a spiritual beauty or essence, but he cannot wish her body away, nor can he deny that it is her physical presence that has drawn him—he is not merely attracted to her mind or her spirit. The very fact that she is a woman rather than a man or an allegorical figure, and that he has fallen in love with her, entails a physical connection of one kind or another, and it is that bond that fuses her innocence and experience. The perfection that Luyanda writes about is of a different kind—it is a body whose very flaws flower into beauty, conjoined with self-awareness and self-belief, supreme self-confidence. One might be tempted to wonder whether this woman is not the epitome of vanity, deserving her place in hell. And one would be encouraged to do so by the dedication to Francesca da Rimini.

Is Luyanda then challenging Dante's scale of values, the judgement by which his pity has to be subjected to his piety (to use the terms that Sonia originally applied to the elective when she initiated it all those years ago)? Few readers have not felt the urge to reverse that judgement, just as they might want to treat Satan as the true hero of Milton's poem. But this would be to miss the point of Luyanda's response. The ambivalence in the reader corresponds to the ambivalence or duality in the figure of the woman—Lesego's ingenuousness and ingenuity, Luyanda's risky employment of the praise poem to assert the glory of female sexuality in a society where women are notoriously abused and taken to be men's rightful prey. The praise poem is by its very nature an exaggeration, not a moralizing or allegorizing narrative. Both these black women students have reached into the current of Dante's river and taken out a rare image of potential womanhood that speaks powerfully to the damaged and dangerous world so many black women inhabit. In this sense Dante has become a vehicle not only for self-discovery but for self-recovery.

Is Beatrice then the white bride from the sea who, whether or not she marries Adamastor, re-energizes African sexuality and brings healing and wholeness to the sexes? I found Helena van Urk's retelling of Canto 6, *The Storm*, reminiscent of Camoes (1572, book 5), with the European vessel coasting along the

African shoreline. The storm itself is even more in Virgil's manner, and Maro is the name she gives her poem as she sets off on her journey with all the evil-doers, the self-aggrandizing manipulators of the colonial enterprise. And of them all, the leader and instigator of the Infernal Crew is the one she calls Cecil, Cecil John Rhodes. Avoiding strict chronology, she places in her ship, not a crew of fools but of colonial oppressors and postcolonial exploiters. The image bears all the richness of mythology, of medieval allegory, of early modern satire. But it ends on a note of hopefulness:

There can be no hope in forsaking
my Salvation...
I feel the sun on my broken skin, warming,
as the storm breaks, heralds a new Morning (final lines, sup., p. 61)

This, surely, is the keynote of our Dantessa writers. Dante does not leave us in despair. The power of his imagination, firing theirs, is not restricted to the flames and ice of retribution meted out to his political opponents. This punishment, the force of moral indignation, drives forward to hope, to the kind of investment in life which sees at the far end the beatific vision.

No Short Cuts to Paradise

History, then, is only the context for vision. It is a remarkable thing that South Africans, of all races and almost all circumstances of life, are, by and large, optimistic. Why is this, and what has Dante to do with the feeding and sustaining of that hope? The underlying pulse of the poem, one to which each of our writers seems to be responding in their own way, is that of the inalienable goodness of ultimate reality, calling out, as G.K. Chesterton (1932) put it, for "the primeval duty of Praise" (27). Even those in the *Inferno* are holding up a structure that is, in the end, healthy. There is a paradox here. History is, by and large, a tale of imperfection. It is a story of human folly, but in our failure lies, still, our hope and the guarantee of our blessedness, if we allow Dante to pinpoint the reason for our post-Apartheid failure. South Africa was expecting to leap straight from hell to heaven, from the pit of Apartheid to the rainbow nation in the sky. It was not to be. To be mired in something like Dante's *Inferno* was to be eternally fixed, it seemed, in one moral condition, which we escaped. Only, if there was movement to follow, it would need to submit to the dynamic that Dante called *Purgatorio*.

For Casey Fern, Purgatory appears as a liminal, transitional place for Dante to encode his own ritual movement back to childhood. Ingeniously, she presents Dante as a kind of Merlin figure, living his life, at least allegorically, in reverse. Whereas in the romance cycle of the quest the hero, traditionally conceived, passes from (a) the young knight or *child's* call or summons to (b) the liminal place of testing, to (c) a mature life of challenge and reality—Dante is steered from the world-weary experience of *Inferno* through the liminal cleansing of *Purgatorio* to the child-like innocence of *Paradiso*, entering deeper and deeper into the beatific vision, "continually relinquishing elements of his previous identi-

ty" (sup., p. 28). To read Purgatory as liminal in this structure of reversal is, as Casey claims, an unconsidered, under-canvassed superimposition of a personal psychological narrative onto an epic anatomy. She reminds us of the daring incongruity of replacing the sage of antiquity, universally respected and even revered in medieval Christian culture, with a young woman whose chief claim on our attention seems to be that Dante fell hopelessly in love with her, at a distance. Dante has progressed from the sure to the speculative, from the known to the unknown, and takes a great risk with his credibility by doing so. For this passing through the liminal to innocence not to collapse into naiveté requires the reader to be caught up in the intensity of Dante's language. So if we see Dante, not so much as a pilgrim but as a figure in romance steadily advancing in reverse, a tension is built up which he, as master craftsmen of words, can utilise to brace his vision in Paradise.

It is not, however, the progression into Paradise that chiefly concerns us here. We are a long way from that. What Casey has done is to place new emphasis on the duality of Purgatory, its Janus-faced character which makes special sense in a South African context. There is always the danger that the journey will go into reverse. Everyone in Purgatory is slowly, oh so slowly and laboriously toiling up the mountain towards safety. In the Cradle of Humankind not far from Tshwane, there is a remarkable installation called "The Long March to Freedom," alluding to Nelson Mandela's (1994) famous autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, but adding a slightly more militant touch, perhaps because, some twenty and more years after the official end of Apartheid there is a growing apprehension that the reconciliation of 1994 may have been bought at too high a price, or, to echo Bonhoeffer (1937), that grace was purchased too cheaply. A triple column of almost life-size bronze figures is frozen on the march up a slight incline. Visitors can walk amongst them and take photographs of themselves with their favourite struggle heroes. The scene bears an uncanny resemblance to the figures of Dante and Virgil threading their way through the figures moving uphill in the *Purgatorio*.

South Africans joining briefly in that long stationary march of sculptures may have mixed feelings. Are they still on the upward journey, or have things not only flattened out but started to go into decline? The world we live in does not play out according to a script or move in one direction. Apartheid came to an end in a glow that for many had a religious tinge to it. The word 'miracle' was used without irony. Irony is the mildest form of disillusionment today, whether it is applied to the word 'rainbow' or to 'empowerment'. Is it any wonder, then, that so few of our contributors, while raiding Dante's text and finding inspiration in it, draw on his religious faith? Faith seems to stand in for something else. Purgatory, for instance, can be a liminal space, with psychological resonance and political implications, but it is not a theological category, a dogma believed and lived by. This may have something to do with the fact that heaven and hell are well-established symbols in our language, believed in by some and understood by all, whereas purgatory is hazy in our minds. Even amongst Catholics, where confession is often treated almost as therapy, a review of spiritual aspira-

tion rather than a purgatorial assessment of culpability and assignment of penance, that state of the afterlife hardly enters into the practice of their religion.

One reader, however, a graduate student closely related to our company, has engaged head on with the theology of the poem, arguing, against the grain, that Virgil was closer to the truth proclaimed in the Bible about the afterlife than Dante himself. Nor is hers simply a Protestant objection to Purgatory. In De-neo Mfenyane's view (in progress), Dante appropriates to himself the authority that belongs only to Scripture; no more than a would-be mystical poet on a pilgrimage, he usurps the role of a prophet. Such a view of Dante reinforces the doubts one might have about Beatrice. If the Beatrice/Dante axis loses its lustre and becomes a common story, with Dante struggling with his desires and disappointments, the poem explodes into drama and sheds the monumental character that may intimidate us.

But if, putting aside our skepticism and regarding *La Commedia* with the kind of awe that gave the *Aeneid* such authority right through the early modern period; if, that is, the structure of the poem stands four-square among the things that are, that are unquestioned, irradically part of our mental and imaginative landscape, the question whether it is true not entering the equation; if, even if we disbelieve its metaphysics and its mythology and question its morality, we allow it room in our minds without a health warning, we can experience the exhilaration of living in several worlds simultaneously. The theme of a purgatorial imperative surfaces again and again. Kai Lötter's story, *The Tree in Hell*, has this refrain: you have to go the long way round, even when it comes to suicide: "I know now, like Dante knew then, that to find the right path after you have lost it, you must go the long way round" (sup., p. 93). I am reminded of Mary Wesley's (1983) novel, *Jumping the Queue*, about an aging woman whose suicide attempt is thwarted on the beach in the opening chapter. It takes her the rest of the novel to circle back to the same point. Kai tells of the attractions of suicide for the mentally ill, and expresses resentment towards Dante for treating it as a sin. The tree in which the suicide is imprisoned is no harbour or resting place for the sufferer; it is a bitter mockery of that longing for it all to end that appeals to us all from time to time. It may surprise us that so few of our homeless and unemployed resort to suicide, given that their daily struggle must be so exhausting. Readers in other contexts, one assumes, must find it hard to enter into the South African consciousness, which can never be free of anxiety over the scale of poverty juxtaposed with the relative affluence that tempts refugees and work-seekers from many other countries to gather up the crumbs under our tables. It feels that the long way round is being stretched almost beyond endurance. How much longer, how slow the climb up the mountain of purgatory? It is almost as if purgatory has relapsed into hell, for as soon as we feel we may be rising up, down we are plunged again, into the ice or the fire or the mud. Upliftment is our aspiration and nearly our despair.

This is not to make a political statement, but to try to understand how the Dantesque imaginary can be so pertinent: it is implicit in the situation we find ourselves. The tree in which we are trapped, enclosed, immobilized, is not the

mighty baobab, ancient and strong, but one that is drought-stricken, stripped of leaves, unable to shelter or succour. It recalls that black madonna in Roy Campbell's (1930) poem, *The Zulu Girl*, whose suckling infant under the thorn tree presages the coming storm. Yet none of our authors seems to be afraid of an apocalypse. Dante is not a source of fear or intimidation or despair. Instead, he offers hope, that we all have a choice for change. Hell is stagnation, an unwillingness to move beyond our current preoccupations and limitations. Change is a function of time: apocalypse is the end of time, and South Africa has lived for far too long under the shadow of the end times. This can be immobilising, even paralysing—paradoxically, since the imminence of the second advent should be, according to St Paul, a spur to action, to constant readiness, with our lamps trimmed and our oil in good supply, for the arrival of the bridegroom, not a cowering in wait for the hour of birth of some rough beast (W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*), or the pounding of the hooves of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The theology, the theological virtue of hope, of the second coming has been replaced by a secular, fearsome expectation of terminal decline. Dante brings some relief.

Time is the subject of an unpublished essay by Ross Smith, meditating on Dante, Ben Okri and time. In the circles of hell, time has stopped because change is no longer available. But Dante has not in fact stepped out of secular time into timeless eternity, for the poem does conform to its own timeline, with sunset, night and morning, as Dante and Virgil pursue their course through the realms of the afterlife. Ross refers us to *aevum* time, that strange hybrid of time which the angels inhabit. He suggests that Ben Okri invokes just such a notion when the time frames of his novels go into overdrive. It is worth pondering on these questions of the nature and the quality of time. South African exponents of liberation theology made much of the term *kairos*, the moment of opportunity for radical change that presents itself and needs to be discerned. In the course of events over the past few decades, *kairos* time—now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation—appears to have been replaced by transformation fatigue. Transformation has become a tired word and anything that replaces it evokes even greater incredulity. What then is *aevum* time? Does it obtain in Dante's afterlife? Has it a place in our own scheme of things? Ross refers us to St Thomas Aquinas, who argues that angels can move continuously or discontinuously; since, dancing in infinite numbers on the end of our imaginary pin, they take up no space, they can transport themselves like knights on a chess board, moving alongside rather than across space, if they wish. If no space is involved, then no time passes, so angels move in and out of time, with a curious flexibility of time and space (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Ia 53). Is that the case with Dante in the world he passes through, not quite taking up any space and using less time than you would think necessary? From the frozen immobility of hell, where time stands still, to the achingly slow dreary trudge as those in purgatory make their way upward while Dante and Virgil accelerate past them, to the eternal bliss of heaven where time and space have a meaning and an existence we cannot comprehend, time moves in and out of the familiar. It is part of Dante's art, to manage time in this strange, unsettling way.

Of the three time schedules, our own must be closest to purgatorial time. What does this mean? Let us imagine ourselves accompanying Dante in purgatory. He walks beside the sinners some of the time; some of the time he is being more swiftly urged towards paradise. Is this not just how we experience time? Sometimes we feel stuck in hell, as if nothing has changed, sometimes as if the road ahead is only just bearable, but we are heartened by the prospect, ultimately, of freedom and release. Occasionally we glimpse the rainbow, and we suspect that it is there all the time. It is not often that our writers offer us such a glimpse; on the whole, Dante spells sorrow and labour for them, but there is something in the allure of his poem, some attraction: unavoidable, irresistible, that brings us back again and again. The reason why that unforgettable last line recurs so often may be that we cannot escape the conviction that such a love, in such a universe, is our inheritance. In the Apartheid days, African Enterprise's Michael Cassidy (1974) appropriated the phrase "Prisoners of Hope" to register the inescapability of that belief, which we are holding on to in this purgatorial state.³

Reading in Purgatory

And what of that other legacy, Verwoerd's legacy? Chariklia Martalas's multiple flights into *Inferno*—fortunately, it seems, always with a return ticket—lead her to some gruesome inventions. In 'Eating John Vorster', Verwoerd, the architect of 'grand Apartheid', has been condemned to eat the heads of all the other Apartheid prime ministers, and is currently busy with B.J. Vorster. There were many more perpetrators of iniquity, and all white South Africans were complicit to a degree. Even those whites who seemed to resist most heroically commonly had the advantage of conspicuous wealth. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

What forgiveness, indeed? There is something in the idea of flight. Chariklia has taken flight into Dante's *Inferno*; many of us may be trying to escape from an intransigent situation which, as the leader-writers used to say in the last years of Apartheid, seems "too ghastly to contemplate." Instead, we contemplate the ghastly scenes in the poem and those which our imaginations conjure up in response, as these essays, poems and stories testify. To watch Verwoerd and the rest is to ask, as Chariklia does, "What do you say to horror Dante?" (line 6, sup., p. 45)—and to recall Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*. Throughout the Apartheid days the liberal English departments relentlessly taught that novel, which became an index to their response to the challenge of teaching and reading literature under such conditions. The way I studied it then, it did not matter where *Heart of Darkness* was located; the river might have wandered through the South American jungles, and Kurtz's horror felt like a metaphysical phenomenon, not an indictment of colonial oppression, let alone the particular atrocities of the Belgian Congo's river of blood. The novel was included in its entirety in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (1976), which functioned almost as the Bible of lit-

³ Cf. Carroll 1906.

erary studies in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. *Heart of Darkness* was thus established as the modernist novel *par excellence*. It took its place alongside *The Tempest* as a meditation on the human condition, somehow shorn of political circumstantiation. Then came the sea change, and postcolonial, anti-Apartheid reading became *de rigueur*. Frank Kermode, both the lead editor of the Oxford anthology and of the flagship Arden edition of *The Tempest* (Shakespeare 1954), attracted scorn, derision and moral indignation. Yet it was he (1985) who recognized the value of David Norbrook's (1984) ground-breaking *Poetry and Politics*.

Twenty-five years or more into the post-Apartheid era, we can ask once more, is it a flight from reality, an escape from responsibility, to immerse ourselves in Dante? I recall the words of one of my own lecturers in those far-off days when it was not politics but high seriousness that distorted our reading: "Ultimately literature must come down to our moral values, the meaning of life, our civic responsibility, but they [the Leavisites] get there much too fast." How appropriate this seems to the demands made on literature students even today: we get to the pressing dilemmas of race and gender in so much of a hurry. There is no doubt that Dante is concerned with politics, but it may be salutary to ponder, when we read him, not only the politics of his day, but the theology of his day, the loving of his day. That is the long way round to freedom in the text.

This is not to criticize or diminish the way so many of our Dantesa writers have turned to current preoccupations or our recent history in response to Dante. It is rather to suggest where that interest could lead them, to a new way of reading. There is a cleansing process in operation. A great deal of luggage, perhaps too much luggage, has been taken on the flight to Inferno. But as we have engaged with Dante's text, that luggage has gradually been unpacked. As long as we have continued to clutch it, we have had to live and think and write like Sisyphus in the mythological version of the underworld, continually rolling and re-rolling the stone. But once we have made the transition to purgatory, we have to let go of it or we will never make our way to the top of the hill.

Another way of putting it is that taking our bearings in purgatory releases us to engage with Dante, and with all of literature, without the anxieties that beset us as citizens of a country in deep trouble. Knowing that the way ahead is long and arduous paradoxically demands that we give full due to what we read, that we take the long way round through the texts, with some sense perhaps of strain, but also of assurance. "Synne is behovabil," said Julian of Norwich—the stress and sorrow inherited from the guilty past weighs us down, but it is seemly, it is right—"but al shal be wel, and al shal be wel, and al manner of thyng shal be wele" (2016, 72). And that includes the literature of the past, to which we can bring a generous spirit.

What, then, is purgatorial reading? What is a purgatorial reading of the *Purgatorio*? [St] John Henry Newman reinvented purgatory in his poem *The Dream of Gerontius*, best known from Elgar's oratorio. The old man dies, meets his maker and judge, and in the presence of that awful holiness, begs to be taken away and cleansed. Gerontius' journey recapitulates our national one: the emptying out of each old constituent, the angel escorting us safely past the demons who gleefully claim that every one has their price, a glimpse of brightness and per-

fection, and then the descent once more to the place of repair. The purgatorial locale is no longer a prison but a place of healing. Newman's (1868, 360) angel puts it in soothing tones:

Softly and gently, dearly-ransom'd soul,
 In my most loving arms I now enfold thee,
 And, o'er the penal waters, as they roll,
 I poise thee, and I lower thee, and hold thee.

That does not read much like the arduous and bracing process we are now experiencing, which seems much more like Gerontius' earlier journey, with the evacuation of self and the depressing suspicion that everyone is for sale. And yet it may not be entirely false to the kind of reading one might do in purgatory.

Even tragedy can be uplifting and energizing. The question is, what to do with the pleasure we feel when we read, however depressing the content? We have had too much of penitential and accusatory reading. There may be a place for that, but it is unnatural, and what is unnatural will not heal us. Reading can be hard—during the Renaissance, students kept stones in their mouths to keep themselves from falling asleep while studying late by candlelight—but it is also satisfying. The pleasure comes at a price. Previous generations earned it with the rigour of Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Middle English, phonetics and bibliography, the apparatus of scholarship that was intended, in part, to give the university study of English credibility in the academy, comparable to science and the classics. What kind of strenuousness will do best for purgatorial reading in post-Apartheid South Africa? If we are to read Dante, can we combine the pleasure of human interest with the severity of scholarship—or would it rather be a matter of self-scrutiny, the reflective application of the text to our own, personal sense of how we should be in the world?

To read Dante in the original Italian, if that is what it takes, means to allow the text to speak to us in its fullness, with not one single word unaccounted for. To identify, chiefly by way of the scholarly notes, every historical reference, is to allow Dante's scenario to take shape before us, unabridged and with every contour defined. And then, to open our inner selves to that fullness of meaning, that plenitude of medieval utterance, is an exercise that will make us new and clean, in a fashion not unlike purgatory. We speak here of the discipline of letters (Gardner 1959): pleasure, reading pleasure, is not frivolous or facile. It brings the same reward as hard-earned proficiency in art or sport. And just as we as a nation are buoyed up by our performers, artists and sports stars, recognizing and paying tribute to the level of discipline required to achieve such success, so we can take courage from the expertise of a new generation of literary scholars, if they will take the time and patience to do the really hard work, bypassing the prevailing jargon and self-righteous theorizing. Transformation and upliftment come, not by bandying those words around and dismissing the language and the arguments of those who have gone before, who themselves thought hard and read widely, but from opening our minds to what we do not yet know but can come, by dint of application and attention, to understand.

Conclusion: Limbo Cancelled

Scholarly sloth can easily masquerade as the deconstruction of received habits of thought. Just so, as has often been observed, all of the seven deadly sins have turned into virtues, or at least into objects of admiration and envy. It is not surprising, then, that twenty-first century students should challenge Dante's moral framework by condoning the behaviour of people he consigned to Inferno. Chariklia's *The Party* projects the confusion of modern spirituality, where personal fulfilment replaces the revealed will of God. Dante too is confused when he appears in *The Party* and in Chariklia's poem about Dido, being drawn to beauty and bewildered by the self-assurance of those whom lust is believed to propel towards the good. Psychologists and Jesuits echo Yeats's line, "that its own sweet will is heaven's will" (*A Prayer for My Daughter*). Look to your sexuality, they admonish us, look to your desires, scrutinize what you are attached to, and you will find your way to a kind of heaven, or, less happily but still impenitent, to a Limbo where all is left uncertain. So here is an alluring alternative to postcolonial Purgatory: postmodern Limbo, where all values shimmer in a haze of indeterminacy. Dante put his pagan philosophers in Limbo; we get there by theorizing every phenomenon instead of looking at it steadily.

Dante is more robust than that, which may be why our Dantessa writers have been drawn to him, sometimes to tease, but also to treat as a source of wisdom. Where shall wisdom be found? The internet says, it is not in me; sociology says, it is not in me; it cannot be gotten by self-help books, neither shall Twitter be trawled for the price thereof.⁴ Underneath all the contemporary pretence of knowingness is still that suspicion that there is something or someone to be feared, some ultimate goodness to be honoured if we are to find wisdom. And so Thalén Rogers's *The Lodestone* may be allowed to have the final say. Italian lines and phrases punctuate the narrative of flight in this story, not a mad flight into Inferno but a melancholy one, ostensibly from Durban to Johannesburg in the company of an old man scarred and stirred by the long past and a middle-aged woman making the most of life's disappointments in a present little changed from that past, attended by a stewardess whose unruffled and unruffleable sculpted hairdo bespeaks the banality and sterility of modern air travel. Thalén writes of post-Apartheid South Africa and its uncertainties as a kind of Limbo, with an aircraft as its symbol. If only we could rise above the past, and that the promise of new life and possibility only a mouse-click away were not so empty. Instead, the earth exerts its pull. The plane can, to be sure, take off and ascend, achieving critical airspeed and almost always avoiding tragedy, but in the end it must come to ground: "Inevitably, we fell back towards the infernal landscape, sucked towards earth by the magnetism of sin" (sup., p. 67). An illusionary Paradise, in effect a Limbo, a state of suspension in the air, becomes Purgatory. We cannot escape it. The pages are in front of us. Let us read.

⁴ Cf. Job 28: 14–5; "O where shall wisdom be found," anthem by William Boyce (1711–1779); coincidentally the title of a book by Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found* (2004).

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